Wise Effort/Balancing Energy

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:43

A lot of what we've been trying to describe in the instructions and a lot of what we do in the interviews is trying to help each of us find what we call balanced effort, balanced energy—the place that we keep talking about of really relaxed yet very vividly awake and alert. It sounds like such a paradox.

A lot of our practice is really not so much about what's going on, but about finding, recognizing, and learning how to dwell more often in this space of absolute non-doing and total presence. So, for example, when we talk about opening to hearing, it's to give that sense of nothing to do, yet the knowing is spontaneous. The sounds arise by themselves. And then going to the breath and noticing that same thing.

And then the next thing we're talking about is really connecting with the breath, really sustaining the attention, getting very precise. And you can wonder, what happened to open, total non-doing? Here we're being asked to put forth this incredible effort to meet every moment of experience. And at the same time, we're being told to do absolutely nothing. What are we talking about in the first place? And how do we find that? How can we learn to dance that line in our practice?

I want to try and talk a little bit about this tonight—this delicate balance of relaxed alertness. How to work with the openness without it becoming lost in space. How to work with precise, connected attention without it turning into tight, controlling effort, being wound so tight we're about to break.

This is really about learning to recognize and explore, to begin with, this mental quality of energy. It's something we often don't recognize as a mental state, a mental factor that comes and goes. Energy is impermanent like every other experience that we have, every other mental state. Sometimes the energy is strong and present and flowing, and sometimes it's really low.

Often we don't recognize that it's simply a mental factor rising and falling due to conditions. We tend to identify with energy and take it very personally when it leaves and think that we're doing something wrong and think that the answer is to push, push, push. Strive, strive, strive. If we force, then the energy is going to come. And we tend to think relaxation means you just disconnect altogether. Just open up, space out, kick back. Turn on the TV if you had that option.

There happens to be a broad middle ground between those two. I want to talk about some ways tonight that have been helpful to me to keep reconnecting with this delicate balance of energy, what's called wise effort or right effort in the practice.

One aspect I want to begin with that I find essential to being in that space of really flowing, balanced attention is this quality of interest, which we've been going on about—get interested in the breath, get

interested in your feet. And I know that's not always exactly what the experience is. The thought is often, "Interested in my breath and interested in my movements all day? This is such an exhausting proposition. How can one possibly sustain that level of interest? It takes too much energy. It's too tiring." And then we're tired just thinking about it before we've even explored if it's possible.

But when there is true interest in our experience, then actually sustained focused attention is quite effortless. In practice here, of course, you might experience it momentarily, but in our lives we all know this experience. I know all of you have different work that you do that you're all quite involved in, and I'm sure you can think of different times in your work—not just five minutes or so, but over a period of maybe some hours—where your interest was just totally engaged, where you weren't wandering. Maybe you were working at the computer, maybe you were working in a courtroom, maybe you were working with a group of people or writing or singing or whatever. When the interest is completely engaged, there's not this sense of, "Oh, I can't pay attention to this anymore, it's too much trouble." It's effortless at that point.

A lot of what brings the interest in the beginning might be a sense of greater motivation. In your work, you might begin it and what might sustain the interest is a sense that you're doing it for some particular good cause, or it might just be for the payoff of having something be the way you want it to be. But when you're actually immersed in the work, if you're getting lost thinking about the motivation, the interest actually isn't there. When you're really interested, you're just there with the work. All of us know that.

And it doesn't even have to come from a so-called pure or wholesome motivation like compassion or trying to help people. One of my favorite examples that really brought home to me the universality of how interest brings focused attention—and that this is effortlessly available to all of us—was a few years ago. I was in San Francisco visiting friends in January during the time of the Super Bowl. I'm not a football fan particularly, but everybody I know in San Francisco basically is a football fan. That year, their team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl.

It was fascinating to me because for those three hours or so, it's like the whole city stopped. I know a lot of people in San Francisco, and they all got together in little groups between five and twenty people, just fixated. I was in a group of about ten people fixated on this game. As soon as the game would start, no talking—it wasn't even thought about. There was no diversion, nobody did anything else, just totally, totally focused.

And no one was saying, "This takes so much energy to pay attention to this game, it's really so hard, I don't know if I can keep it up." It was completely effortless. It's also interesting that as soon as the commercial came on, that quality of interest was totally gone, just turned off like a switch.

So it's not that the interest and that focused attention and the steadiness of it isn't accessible to us. What's more interesting to me, actually, is to see what it is that we choose to get interested in, and why it is that so many people can get so fascinated by a football game. I mean, these are people who are deeply committed to non-harming and non-violence in their lives, who are really spending their lives trying to do things to

help themselves, one another, and the planet—and they're so engrossed with these guys beating each other up on the field. It's really quite an interesting phenomenon to me. But okay, that's an aside.

What's even more interesting is that I could care less about football, but being in their company, I got really involved in the game too. And that's what's fascinating to see—it's sort of catching. So partly on this retreat, you can catch interest in the meditation from each other.

Now, I'm not trying to say that the interest, the quality of attention in that football game, is exactly the same as the quality of attention in our practice, because there are certain elements of motivation that aren't so wholesome. For example, I don't think anyone was watching that game without a real desire for one particular team to win. So there was an ongoing quality of craving in the motivation—or maybe hatred of the other team, or whatever—but it's not just pure interest. Even though there's a lot of talk about the artistry of the game and all this stuff, there's definitely a sense of a not-so-wholesome motivation. But still, the potential is there.

And why is it, whether we're a football fan or something else, whether it's a movie, why is it we can get so effortlessly present for periods of time for some things, but it can be so difficult when we come here to bring that quality of interest to what's happening in our life? I mean, whatever's arising in our experience in this moment—that is absolutely all we have in the world, in our life, is this moment. And how much of the time are we not that interested in it? We'd rather have another moment. We'd rather think of a different moment that happened five years ago. We'd rather make up something that could happen next. But we don't have that interest that just lets us be fully present for this moment.

There's a sense of picking and choosing. Of course, I talked some about that the other night—that part of that picking and choosing comes from our liking the pleasant and not liking the unpleasant. It also comes from our sense of evaluating what we think is worthwhile, what we think isn't worthwhile. And a lot of the time in practice here, what we are present with is just something that is sort of mundane. It's maybe not intense enough, or it's really familiar. I mean, have you ever had the thought, "Oh, the breath again. I've felt the breath so many times. I really know the breath. Let's move on to something more interesting."

I read an article in the San Francisco paper a few years ago about a young woman, twenty-one, who had cystic fibrosis—was born with it, of course. And so at twenty-one, she was on the verge of death, and she got a partial lung transplant from both parents. It was just quoting an interview with her, and it was so beautiful. She was so upbeat, and she was saying something like, "It's so wonderful to breathe. Air, a clear breath, is just the most wonderful thing I could imagine in this life."

I thought, ah, you know—how many breaths have I taken in my life? Even that I'm aware of, I've taken a lot of breaths in my life. But how often have I brought that quality of real interest to it? And how would it be if we didn't breathe for five minutes? Even two minutes, we'd be pretty interested in it.

So it's often this not even conscious judgment: "It's too familiar. I know it. I've experienced this before." "I

don't have to pay attention to this pain. I know about this pain. I've looked at this pain." "Oh, I know this emotion, this anxiety. I've experienced it a thousand times. Let's move on to something else." And what we're doing is denying ourselves the interest for our life, because that's our life at this moment.

So really, what our practice is—the practice of mindfulness—it gives us the skill to bring our attention more closely into whatever's happening. And sure, at the first moment, we might not be interested in the breath. But what we find out is that when our attention is more connected with what's happening, the interest is actually enhanced. So when you're really there with the breath, there can be times when the breath is just fascinating. It's not that the fascination or the interest is inherent in the object or in the breath.

The interest is in the quality of attention. It's that willingness to bring the attention that will again arouse the sense of interest.

This unconscious—or sometimes conscious—tendency we have to evaluate what is worth being interested in is so insidious that we don't even notice it. And what makes it even more insidious is that this tendency to only be interested in certain things, due to whatever conditioning, actually distorts our perception of reality. Without realizing it, by just following what we're interested in like a leaf in the wind, we're not even perceiving what's actually so.

An example from Daniel Goleman's book *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* illustrates this perfectly. He describes a psychological experiment where subjects watched a four or five minute video of a basketball game—a very fast-paced sequence with a lot of rapid ball-changing. The assignment given to the subjects was to notice how many times the ball was passed. That's what they were really focused on, what they were interested in.

That interest so narrowed their vision that while this fast game was going on, a woman in white with a parasol strolled through the middle of the basketball court—and nobody noticed. When the experiment was over and the subjects were asked how many times the ball was passed, they all answered. But nobody mentioned, "What was that woman doing on the basketball court?" In fact, when the experimenters asked about it, the response was essentially, "What woman? What are you talking about?" Most of them hadn't even noticed her.

It's amazing because once that's pointed out, you couldn't watch that video and not see the woman. But when we're just going with selective interest, we miss so much and we don't even know it.

This is why we have discipline in our practice—because there will be times when we're not interested. God knows. And the discipline is not about pushing, but that gentle coming back to let us again connect: just with the breath, just with the sensation, just with the emotion. Not choosing what's happening, but simply connecting with what is. In that gentle being with it, the interest will come again. And once more, this connection and presence will begin to seem effortless. It won't be this sense of push, push, push

anymore.

The more we begin to pay attention in this way, the more mindfulness allows us—consciously or not, it just begins to happen—to drop these distinctions of what's worth our interest. We begin to see, to really experience, the interrelatedness of all experience. We start seeing that our evaluations—this is good or bad, right or wrong; this particular experience is going to lead to opening in my practice, while this particular experience is a total waste of time that we'd better get rid of—we begin to see that this is a totally useless form of thinking. Although of course we all do it, mostly unconsciously.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master who teaches meditation—he's a Buddhist monk and also a peace activist, in case you don't know who he is; he's become quite well known in meditation and mindfulness circles in recent years—talks a lot about interrelatedness in very simple terms. He speaks about how we can't really say "this is good" and "this is bad" and divide experience or divide the world up in this way, because everything is cause and effect. We can't say what cause leads to what effect.

He uses the example of how we tend to like a rose and disdain garbage. But actually, as a rose dies, it becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and use it for compost, and it turns into a rose. How are we making these distinctions? How are we saying one thing is worthwhile and another isn't worth our interest? Actually, sometimes it's the thing we think isn't interesting that can open us up to much more profound understanding. The sublime and the painful are two sides of the same coin. In my experience, they often come so close together that I couldn't separate them.

I was doing a self-retreat this spring, about four or five weeks. I was going through a period where it was a painful retreat—a lot of terror, a lot of fear, a lot of confronting the uncontrollability, the imminence of death, how one moment can change our whole life and nothing can change it back. That kind of retreat.

And nature was playing along too. It was in South Africa, in a really beautiful location overlooking some green, beautiful hills. They had the most incredible thunderstorms I have ever experienced in my life. There weren't many people there, and I didn't know anybody. I'd only been there a few days. And the day I hit into this sense of terror—complete uncontrollability, imminence of death—that was the night nature decided to have the most amazing display of fireworks I've ever seen. Lightning every second, flashing for miles across the hills and flashing right into the room. It was really amazing. It went on for two or three hours.

And of course, I was terrified. I was hiding under my blanket, saying to myself, "Oh, just fear, fear, just empty fear."

But I really liked the way the universe will conspire to let us know what we need to pay attention to—in case I didn't notice that it was out of control, and that that brought up fear, here's another dose.

On that retreat, there were also moments of just opening to the beauty, to the exquisiteness of nature, and the joy of being alive. And it was so interesting because I found it was impossible to open to that without

immediately there being a rush of fear—of the uncontrollability, of the imminence of death. In fact, they were so close together, the incredible joy and connection with all life. Of course, as soon as we're connected with all life, we've got to connect to impermanence, to uncontrollability, because that is life. But it was like the beauty and the pain were so close together that at times I really couldn't even tell the difference.

It was so clear that I couldn't pick one and say, "This is worth paying attention to, and I think I'll ignore this other one." At that point I didn't have a choice. But when we try to ignore one and just get interested in how beautiful something is, it doesn't work for very long. We need to be really open to the whole and see that they feed each other.

Another example where sometimes what seems horrible, so painful, is actually the door to real opening: I have a friend who has AIDS. He's had HIV for some time, and in the last few years, as it does, it's getting more intense. He's not dying immediately, but he has varying sicknesses. What's been really interesting to watch—because I've known him for some ten years or so, well before he was diagnosed—is to see how almost it goes together. The more often he gets sick, the deeper the disease goes, the more he's opening. His heart and his being are opening into a kind of radiance that people are just drawn to. His understanding just flows out of him. He's a real beacon to many, many people in their lives. And at the same time, he's going through a real depth of suffering and terror. It's not like he's dancing through it. It's really the deeper the suffering goes, the deeper the radiance is coming out of him. And almost—I mean, I'm not wishing he were ill, you understand what I mean—but it's almost like you can't separate the two. It's how life is. The two go so close together. There's no such thing as only beauty.

And even just opening to the mundane. It doesn't have to be the horrible suffering of age or illness—just the mundane. Just opening to our footsteps. Just opening to being present when we think it isn't very interesting. Like the other night when I talked about opening to the sense of just being tired—that's all. Just being with the tiredness. Not that interesting. I don't expect anything to happen from it. There's no big payoff. And suddenly there's the awareness of beauty. It comes together.

This is a poem from a Japanese woman of the tenth or eleventh century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house.

I love that. Although the wind blows terribly here, the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. And opening to one, we open to all of it.

Having experiences of that for yourself—my telling you might, for a moment, make you say, "Oh, well, maybe I'll look at something I didn't think I'd be interested in." But then when you do that, and you really have an experience for yourself of how something that normally wouldn't be interesting can be compellingly interesting and open us to a much deeper understanding of ourselves—then, again, that will

fuel the interest and the willingness to be present that lets this effortless awareness begin to flow more easily.

So often—and people have said it here—it can happen on a retreat where there's a pain, and after we've exhausted every possibility of avoiding, of bargaining, of moving, of trying to pretend we're paying attention while we're really paying attention to something else... you know the whole scenario. And finally it dawns on us that maybe I could just really pay attention to this pain and nothing else and just be there with it. That takes a balance of energy. That takes a time when the energy is sort of fresh and you can be there with it. And we really move into that pain and it gets really interesting. It might go away, it might not go away. Later the energy falls and you can't be there with it.

But in that moment, it's really interesting. And often what is seen is that actually, sometimes you can't even call it pain. So much of what was difficult was the fear, the aversion, the thinking about it, and all the resistance that was going in. The same is true with difficult emotions. And seeing that for oneself, even if it's just for a moment, can be transformative. It gives us what is called verified faith—faith coming from your own experience. And that's really where the confidence comes to bring interest, where interest will spring from in your practice. It doesn't take hours of seeing something like that. It just takes an instant to give more of a sense of verified faith. "All right, I don't think this is worth paying attention to, but maybe if I really do let myself sink into it, it gets interesting. It's my life. It's worth it." And we have more of that motivation that isn't so hinged to wanting a future result—that's much more about being willing to be awake in our life.

So when this interest is present—and of course this comes and goes too—when it is present, the quality of balanced effort, of balanced energy where we're just there, we're not thinking about pushing or changing or needing to relax, we're just totally there, it becomes its own reward. There's no need at that point for a motivation or trying to get to some other goal.

I've actually found in my own formal meditation practice, meaning on retreat, when I'm noticing these qualities much more finely—of course, it's present in our life all the time—but when the effort is balanced in this way, it's its own reward. I've come to feel that when I find a sense of real fulfillment, of almost happiness in my practice—and it can happen, it can happen that you actually are happy to be practicing this form of meditation—that real sense of fulfillment and happiness comes not from something nice happening. It's got actually nothing to do with what's happening. It's when there's that quality of wholehearted interest and attention and effort, the effort of just being present. I know that I can be having what would seem like a day from hell in my practice, and what makes the difference between me calling it bad practice or me feeling fulfilled in it is this quality of interest. When I'm really there and willing to be with whatever happens, then whatever happens, I feel like the practice is going fine. And there's nothing to do or nothing to change. And of course, that changes too, because everything changes.

So you can be in that quality of really balanced energy and effort, meeting what's happening with interest,

without making distinctions. That effort, though—and I've said it before, I'm going to say it again—the effort we're making, the energy that's coming, is only to be fully present with what's happening. That's all. There is no quality in this balanced effort of trying to change things, of trying to move it on a little to the next place, of trying to make it more clear, of trying to get it to open. The effort can be wholehearted, absolutely complete, but only to fully be here for what is.

You see how delicate that is. It's so delicate. For many of us, the deep habits of our lifetime are that we do something to make a certain result happen, and that's the only way we know how to put out an effort. And so we might for a moment meet something fully, but so easily the expectation or the motivation, the idea of what we're trying to make happen, comes in. And we think it's still this balanced effort, but it's really expectation or wanting in disguise. We think we're meeting something fully, but somehow it gets a little bit skewed. And you can begin to tell because it won't have that fulfilling feeling anymore. It won't have that sense of ease or effortless presence anymore, because somehow, somewhere, what's happening has suddenly stopped being quite okay.

And at that point, our response can be one of two things. It can be—which it often is, if we've really learned how to strive in our lives—"It's not right, so put out more effort." But again, this effort is skewed. It's expectation. So it's push, push, push. And we're not meeting what's happening. We're not meeting the breath. We're not meeting an emotion. We're not meeting the pain. We're pushing at it. We're hammering at it. We're trying to shift it. And it's really exhausting. It really withers our heart and mind. The other extreme is, "Let's just blow this off. It isn't happening."

But first, I want to talk about this point when effort gets a little bit skewed, but you think you're still really trying wholeheartedly. It can be very deceptive. It can really fool us. You get this sense of pushing, pushing, bringing up more effort, needing it every moment. But because it's skewed, because we're trying to make something happen, the effort we're putting out is not skillful means. Skillful means is perhaps adjusting the way we're relating—not to change the arising appearance, but simply to find again that balance of relaxation and attention.

The example the Buddha gave in talking about finding this balance of effort was to a person who made lutes, an instrument like a guitar. He was very skillful in who he would talk to; he could always find the thing that would exactly meet the way their mind worked. So he gave the example of a lute, that it has to be tuned just right to sound good. You can make it a little bit tighter, and that might help—but if you keep going, just tighter, tighter, tighter, it doesn't necessarily work. Eventually the string will snap. But if it's a little bit too tight and you loosen it a bit, then it sounds fine. Yet if we think, "Well, loosening is the way to go," and then we loosen, loosen, loosen until you can't play the string at all. And even though you can get it at perfect pitch, you play it a little while and the pitch changes again, and you have to check it out. You can't assume that because last time you loosened it, this time you should loosen it too. You don't know. You have to play it. You have to see what the conditions are right now. Is it too tight? Too loose? Try a little bit. You tighten it—no, no, it was too tight, so you loosen it. It's really being very immediate, looking at what's

happening right now, finding that balance, learning how to play. And we usually learn by going too far one way, seeing how painful that is, seeing that it doesn't work. We might go a little too far the other way, and then we come back into balance.

I really got this one time in my own practice—the sense of how it can look like perfect practice, total effort, and yet be dry and torturous without you even recognizing it. I was doing a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, who Joseph has mentioned. He is a real taskmaster. You don't go there expecting him to offer some of the things I'm going to say later about opening up and going out in nature—you're not going to hear that from U Pandita. So it's very easy to tighten the string and tighten the string until you're about to snap, and not really get any other kind of feedback. I had practiced with him often before, and I could be very present, noting every single movement, every single thing I was doing, from the morning I got up until the moment I went to bed.

The day before this retreat started, I talked to my mother on the phone, and she told me she had just been diagnosed with cancer. About ten days into the retreat, she was going to have a mastectomy and a hysterectomy. I said, "Of course, well, I'm coming home." She said, "No, you're not. I don't want you to come home. No way. You have to do this retreat." This was my mother, who wasn't really into sitting, and she was usually not that firm. She said, "I do not want you to come home." All right. Okay. She doesn't want me there. I won't come home.

So I went and started the retreat. I was calling home every day, and that was fine—it wasn't sending my mind spinning or something. So I thought I was fully present. I was doing this retreat perfect to form, from the moment I got up to the moment I went to bed. It looked perfect. I felt like I was really putting out complete balanced effort. And it was getting more and more dry and arid. I didn't quite realize how bad it was until about three weeks in. I was coming up the stairs where I would always do walking meditation in a certain hallway. And I thought—and this wasn't just one of those passing thoughts; this thought I really bought into—"If someone is walking there, I'm leaving the retreat." I really meant it. I opened the door, and no one was walking there.

I thought, "Oh, I have to stay. Something's going on here that I'm really not noticing." It woke me up.

And I really saw that it can look like—to yourself, never mind anyone else, but to yourself—that the effort you're putting out is really there, really balanced. I was meeting every moment. But if it's not really springing from your heart, if it's not really springing from within, it won't work.

So in a way, what I was doing was putting in an effort to match an outer appearance of how the practice is supposed to be, how I knew the practice was supposed to be, and I could conform to that. But there wasn't a true interest in it springing from myself, from my heart. It was really fifty percent show. And when I saw that—because half of me was home with my mother, that's where I really felt I should be—actually, after that, I did go home. I left the retreat and went home, and she's fine. She's been fine ever since. And I stayed home for some days. It was the right thing to do. And then I went back and I was totally present. It

was like a six or eight week retreat, and I was totally present there for the rest of it. Really different. You know, not always joyous, but the interest was there. It was springing from myself.

So really seeing that in the beginning, we can think right effort means to match the form perfectly. But if we're doing it with this outer forcing, it's going to wither our heart, wither our mind. We're not going to be able to keep it up. And something will wake us up to that.

So a lot of our practice is learning how to find this balance. Because when there's the real balance of interest in the mind, the mind is bright. It's interested in being with what is happening. And there's a patience, a willingness, just an ease to come up and meet what is difficult. If there's not that balance of effort and interest coming from inside ourselves, we won't be able to meet what is difficult.

Because as you've seen, when there's painful or unpleasant sensations or emotions or any kind of experience, when it comes up, the mind's immediate reaction is to kind of shrink away, to fall back. That's the first reaction of aversion. Also, when Joseph was talking about sloth and torpor last night, the tendency of the mind is to just pull back, shrink away, fall down. And if there's energy, if there's interest and energy, that serves as a support to the mind. So when there's a tendency to shrink back, the energy can come in—that balance that can be fed by interest—and it's like, "Oh, you can come back and meet it."

A lot of people have reported how some kind of difficult experience tends to come and go, often throughout the day. In the morning, for example, there's a kind of freshness. There's more energy and it's easier to really meet that experience and be there with it. And later in the day, there's not that freshness. The energy is lower and so it doesn't give the support, and the tendency of the mind to shrink away and get fatigued is stronger. There's just not that energy there to balance it. And we don't quite know at that point how to find that energy again.

But in the times before we've gotten so fatigued from really fighting or struggling with something difficult—in that first moment of coming to something difficult, the pain, anger, difficult emotion, and there's that tendency to shrink away—we can see again why we say it's not necessarily being kind to yourself to give in to that. Because that shrinking could just be for a moment. We can summon mindfulness, interest, and energy and come back and meet that, and it's not even a difficulty anymore. But if we just get into that tendency when it first arises, it's really, as Joseph was saying, that sloth and torpor, and it just leads to more fatigue, more disconnection, and we really get lost.

This is from Thomas Merton. These words might seem a little strong. I would just call it the mind shrinking away. He's calling it laziness and cowardice:

Laziness and cowardice are two of the greatest enemies of the spiritual life, and they are most dangerous of all when they mask themselves as discretion. This illusion would not be so fatal if discretion itself were not one of the most important virtues of a spiritual person. Indeed, it is discretion itself that must teach us the difference between cowardice and discretion. Laziness and cowardice put our own present comfort before the

love of God—or I'd say the love of truth—*they fear the uncertainty of the future because they place no trust in God. Discretion warns us against wasted effort.*

But for the coward, all effort is wasted effort. Discretion shows us where effort is wasted and when it is necessary. Laziness flies from all risk. Discretion flies from useless risk but urges us on to take the risks that faith and the grace of God demand of us. Sooner or later, if we follow Christ, we have to risk everything in order to gain everything. We have to gamble on the invisible and risk all that we can see and taste and feel. But we know the risk is worth it because there is nothing more insecure than the transient world. For this world as we see it is passing away.

So it's different language from what we use in Buddhism, but the same feeling. Discretion is our skillful means—knowing when the shrinking away of mind is really what he's calling laziness or cowardice, or what I would simply call low energy or our tendency to avoid. And discretion can bring us back in to be with what is happening in a gentle way.

Discretion can also tell us when the energy is low and the mindfulness is not present, when what is happening is too painful, too ongoing, when the mind is withering from constant battering against the painful, whether physical or emotional. By continuing to try to meet it with an effort that's a little askew, we're only going to bring on a sense of defeat, a sense of frustration and greater pain. At that point, discretion says move the attention away. This is not cowardice and this is not laziness. This is skillful means born of clear seeing—the recognition that there are times when the energy is not balanced enough, when we're somehow caught in struggle, and the only way to come out of that tightness is to move the attention away altogether.

Even when we have a deep commitment to be with what is so in our practice—it might be something very painful, and there is a genuine wanting to understand it—even when our motivation is quite pure, quite sincere, somehow just creeping in, we've gotten caught in trying too hard, tightening the string too much, coming at the pain, coming at the emotion. Sometimes a well of grief opens up in us, a well of memory, a well of terror, a well of physical pain, and it comes so strongly that it seems we're drowning. We're just drowning in it. Or we're somehow so wanting to be with it that we keep battering against it, getting tighter and tighter. At these times, it's skillful means, it's discretion that tells us we're losing the spaciousness. In fact, spaciousness is a word that hardly seems relevant at times like that. We just feel like we're being engulfed.

It's important to open to difficulty and suffering, yes. And we've talked a lot about that. In fact, one of the ways we can cultivate commitment and interest when it starts to flag—one of the classical ways this is taught—is to consciously reflect on the suffering in ourselves and in the world. This is not morbid, not about making ourselves miserable. This is for those times when we're sitting and we think, "Why should I bother paying attention? What's the point? I've been looking and looking—what am I doing this for?"

There are classical reflections that bring up a sense of commitment, a sense of urgency. One is on the

imminence of death, the fact of impermanence. It awakens a sense of "I don't have time to waste." Another is tuning into our own suffering or the suffering in the world around us—what is sometimes called the defects of samsara, of this round of birth and death. We begin to see that it somehow doesn't quite work in the way we think. Another reflection is on the preciousness of our human life.

For everyone here, just by virtue of having the time and the willingness and the interest to be here, we are incredibly graced. Out of all the possibilities for existence on this planet, as we all know, there are so many people whose suffering is so intense that even the thought, the possibility of beginning to explore the nature of themselves and the nature of truth seems too far away, where all of life is engaged in a struggle just to eat.

Going to Asia is always a wonderful reminder for me of this—both an awakening to the immensity of suffering on this planet, which spurs me to see what I can do in my little way to at least not bring more suffering, and if I can do something to alleviate it, even better. But also a sense of such gratitude and appreciation for the health, the willingness to really look at what is true, the opportunity. And there are many people who have both the health and the opportunity but just plain aren't interested.

When we go to Bodh Gaya—Joseph mentioned it the other night, where the Buddha was enlightened—this really struck me. There are people like those who run the chai shop where we hang out, who have lived there all their lives. Streams of Buddhist pilgrims come and go, all kinds of teachings happen, all the Tibetan lamas pass through, any Buddhist who's anybody comes through there at some point, as do Hindus, as do all kinds of spiritual people. And this man is living and running the chai shop and he's not really too interested. It's just not a priority, just not a particular value. So even to have this as an interest, we are so blessed. When I reflect on that—one of the classic reflections—it can bring up motivation.

"Okay, okay, I'll go back and be with my knee pain. I don't have so much to fret about after all."

So there's a way that opening to suffering really brings up this sense of spiritual urgency—if we open to it, not in the way of drowning, not in the way of "oh my God, this is unbearable," but if we meet it as an inspiration. There's a Thai teacher who recently died, Ajahn Buddhadasa, who said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. And it's not the particular suffering—it's in our attitude. So when we really open and see what's around us and in us, that can bring us back to this interest, this motivation to investigate, to be genuinely curious about what's happening for us.

We can be in the same situation and yet become so complacent that it can be really helpful sometimes to bring in these reflections.

About ten or eleven years ago—you've probably heard of Jon Kabat-Zinn by now, and his stress reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Hospital in Worcester, which happens to be very near Barre, where our meditation center is. For a period of eight weeks, once a week, seriously ill patients who've

been referred to this program by doctors who basically can't do anything else come together. They might have ongoing chronic pain, they might have cancer, they might have anxiety—all different conditions, but basically very serious ongoing pain and stress that the medical profession can't help them with anymore. And what they teach in this program, without any of the Buddhist terminology, is basically just the meditation we've been doing here.

With each program, they have a group of interns—people who can sit in on the program who aren't patients, but who go through it exactly the same way just to see how it's done. So about eleven years ago, I was managing the retreat center with my friend, the other manager, and another dear friend who was cooking, and we did this internship program.

It was so fascinating. What I learned the most about was complacency—and the power that comes from real spiritual urgency.

We went in definitely complacent. Well, we know this meditation stuff. We not only work in a meditation center, we've been doing it for fifteen years, and so on and so forth. We would come into the class, and while he'd be doing the meditations, having us lying down, the patients would be really getting into it. We would fall asleep. And then we'd have to listen to this body scan tape every night at home. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep. I don't normally fall asleep every time I meditate, but I just didn't have this interest.

And we'd come home exhausted, with headaches, really stressed out. We actually got really stressed out from doing this. Meanwhile, the people in the program were having amazing experiences. I remember one woman said, after about four weeks—I mean, they're only coming to this for three hours a week and doing forty-five minutes a day of meditation at home, that's all—after the fourth week, she says, "I've had about four migraines a week for the last several years, and I haven't had a migraine now for two or three weeks." My friend and I just looked at each other. We were going home with splitting headaches from this.

And we knew it. We already knew all of this.

So there was something—both about the freshness, but I think it's even more the motivation. Being faced with pain and suffering when you've been told that the medical profession you believe in has basically said, "Sorry, folks, we can't do anything"—it's like, "Oh, we've really got to look. I've got to wake up. I've got to see what's going on." It was profound, and it continues in that way to this day.

You can see how I came out of that thinking: What am I waiting for? Do I have to wait until I get a terminal disease before I really start paying attention to my life? I mean, we all have a terminal diagnosis anyway. And just because we might feel healthy now, the truth is—who knows what's going to happen when we walk out of the door? And I just take it so for granted.

So that's a way that opening to suffering doesn't have to be overwhelming. It can really be an inspiration to us, to get interested again.

And again, opening to suffering in the bigger picture like this, or in our practice when something is happening—that's what I started to say before I took this digression. When there's something happening that we're trying to open to, but it's just too much. Or sometimes the suffering in the world, or the suffering in our lives or in people around us, is just more than we can be with at that time. And there are going to be times like that for all of us, in our practice and in our life—where you just feel like you're either beating your head against the wall or you're drowning, just drowning in the suffering.

And it seems like it's all futile and pointless. The idea of effortless attention, of interest, of a kind of joy and fulfillment in practice becomes a totally alien idea.

Part of what's happening is we're leaving the comfort zone. When we begin to open and pay attention—as Joseph was saying, as we get more concentrated—things that we didn't notice before really start to come into our field of attention. And with the practice of paying attention, we don't really have an out of running away. So it looms larger and larger. We're leaving the comfort zone that we've set up for ourselves, and we've all found ways in our lives to try and stay comfortable. Of course, that keeps us restricted. It keeps us in denial. And the only way of opening is by coming out of the comfort zone.

But sometimes it's just too much. And the skillful means, the discretion, is knowing that the most skillful thing you can do is take your attention away from that difficulty and turn it to something else. Pushing, pushing, pushing is not necessarily the answer. In fact, it usually isn't. Grimness and heaviness is not balanced effort. If you're feeling really grim and heavy, I'd say there's a ninety-eight percent possibility that you're pushing too hard, or that something's going on you can't quite see or be with, and that the skillful thing to do at that time would be to take your attention and turn it elsewhere.

It's hard for most of us to believe this. Because generally, in my experience, when that grimness comes in and I'm pushing so hard because something isn't right, what's also come in is a sense of self-judgment. It's not right because I'm not doing it right, because I don't understand the practice, because I don't have balanced effort, because whatever. And in that state of self-judgment, which I'm very familiar with personally, if you don't recognize its presence, that self-judgment is going to filter any evaluation you make of what's going on.

So when you're pushing and you're in self-judgment—I'm not doing it right, it's my fault—and someone says, "You know, it's too heavy, you need to back off, you need to open up," your mind will never believe it. No, I'm being a wimp. Wimps don't open up. Clearly the schedule is sit, walk, sit, walk. That's for a reason, and if I don't do it, somehow I'm not good enough, I'm not doing it right. A lot of what we do on meditation retreats is beg people to back off, because it's really hard for someone to get it that that's the most skillful thing to do, that that is good practice at that time.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about how it's important to open to suffering, but when we're drowning, we need to consciously bring up seeds of joy. So sometimes that means here, in a way, we're graced. It's one of the reasons it's so helpful to do a meditation retreat in such a beautiful environment—because the

balance, the potential for opening to joy, for touching what is beautiful, for bringing in the spaciousness of heart and mind, that is accessible to us pretty immediately.

So when you're feeling this gripping, this heaviness, when you're just pounding your head against a wall, go outside. Take a walk. Go down and sit by the river. Open up your senses. Smell all the different smells of the grasses and the wildflowers. Just listen to the birds. Watch them playing. Watch Miss Faye roaming around here looking for scraps. Watch Elvis the dog, who Franz and I decided is the perfect impersonation and manifestation of restlessness, of restless energy. If you want to see what restless energy is, watch him down by the river. He can't sit still. He can't follow one thing for one second. It's really great—it makes you laugh.

Bring in some joy, some lightness. It's the most skillful thing you can do at those times. It's not a diversion. It's not cheating. It's not wrong in this practice to be happy, to have joy. We need it. We need it because it's the only way we can find the balance to open to how painful things can be at times. The two really support each other.

So if you even have the suspicion that things are too grim, give it a try. Go out, open up, and just be with what is. Not with clinging—appreciation of things as they are, not with clinging.

And you can tell when the clinging comes in because the joy kind of stops.

I had an experience again at this place in South Africa. It was beautifully landscaped, the retreat center, and the paths were lined with huge bushes of white, very white and delicate lavender irises. Mostly it was bushes, but one day it was really hot and they just all bloomed and it was so exquisite. I came out, and I was just looking at that, drinking it in—just beautiful, so happy, the joy.

And then there was this one moment where it went, "This is so beautiful. It will only last a day. I wish I had a camera. Maybe I could get a camera and take a picture, and then I can really preserve it, and then I can show it to my friends." And I really got into this—"Got to find a camera, got to preserve it, it's so beautiful." Well, I was no longer appreciating it at all. I was totally caught in clinging, and it wasn't pleasant. But somehow if we don't notice that, we think we're still appreciating.

So just have an eye out for that when you go out—when it stops being joy and turns to clinging. Or on the other hand, when it stops being awareness of joy and you're just totally spacing out. You're walking, but you're not aware of anything; you're just thinking again. Then that's gone too far in the openness direction and it's time to come back and sit, or do your walking meditation.

I just want to encourage you all to know that opening, changing the attention—opening to hearing is one thing to do in the sitting. Opening to the whole of nature is the next step when it's really getting too tight. And trust it. Pay attention to the effects. If you do it and feel a sense of more spaciousness and ease, and you can come back and sit a little easier, it's helpful. If you go out and find all you want to do is keep walking—and in fact you think you'll just walk right on out of here—then that might not have been what

you needed in that moment. It's a delicate balance, and you have to just pay attention. How tight is the string?

I want to end on that note with a poem by Ryokan that embodies for me that sense of presence and appreciation of nature that comes when we're really interested and attuned. And the same can be tuned to ourselves.

A Poem of Early Fall

After a night of rain, water covers the village path.
This morning the thick grass by my hut is cool.
In the window, distant mountains the color of blue-green jade.
Outside, a river flows like shimmering silk.
Under a cliff near my hut, I wash out my sore ear with pure spring water.
In the trees, cicadas recite their fall verse.
I had prepared my robe and staff for a walk, but the quiet beauty keeps me here.

So let's explore the quiet beauty in ourselves for a few minutes.

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